

Team Leadership: Formal and Informal Leadership in Police Departments

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Abstract

Throughout life, there are certain aspects that cannot be changed, but need constant enhancement. One such aspect is that of leadership. This is the act of guiding others in order to achieve a specific goal. This guidance can either be formal or informal. Both kinds of leaderships have been known to occur simultaneously within an organizational setting. Where formal leaders take on an authoritative style, informal ones act with no authority, but due to their knowledge and expertise, their peers consider them leaders. The police department has seen a number of successful informal leaders who continue to shape the careers of other officers. This paper draws attention to the existence of informal leadership in police departments and examines how this impacts on formal leadership.

Keywords: Formal leadership, informal leadership, police, organization, leadership.

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Introduction

Leadership without a doubt is one focal area as far as team and organizational success is concerned. To a great length, the type and effort portrayed by leadership impacts on the manner in which team members are in a position to meet desired objectives. Leaders are either naturally born or nurtured into becoming exceptional members of a given team. As such, they play different roles, but the most important is that of being at the forefront.

Different organizations have different leaders and this is evident in police force itself. Working in different teams under various departments, the police unit is governed by different levels of leadership just as is the case with other forms of organizations. As part of this organization, it has come to my attention that the overall success of a departmental team is shared by both formal and informal leaders. These two often work simultaneously in ensuring that organizational and personal goals of the team are met as effectively as possible.

As I started out in the police force, I was determined to get promoted up the rank and this far, I have noted that the informal leaders have played an important role in achieving personal career growth. Informal leaders, as explained by Campbell & Kodz (2011), are those who have no authority recognition, but have leadership potential that allows them to assume such positions. Leadership to them comes almost naturally and that is why their peers look up to them for knowledge and command where necessary. Formal leaders, on the other hand, have the authority and they must achieve a set of responsibilities within their position. This research paper seeks to address how team leadership, both formal and informal interact and what role each plays in influencing policing units. It will answer questions relating to the kind of impact both have, why informal leaders exist in the police force, how a department can be affected when formal leaders

fail to lead, the consequences of informal leaders overstepping their boundaries and lastly, how formal leaders view the informal ones.

How Formal and Informal Leaders Interact and the Roles Each Play

To begin with, Campbell & Kodz (2011) are of the opinion that most organizations will have the presence of informal leaders who play an important role in impacting on it culturally. This is true in respect to police teams where the informal leaders tend to promote a culture that is ethically correct within the capacity of policing. Informal leaders impact a police agency by instilling or emphasizing on a given set of ethical behaviors. Whilst the formal leaders strive to implement various work standards for every member to abide by in order to achieve police professionalism (Kaptein & Reenen, 2001) the informal leader impacts on cultural circumstances.

To further explain the above, there is normally the aspect of work ethics, personal responsibilities and fair treatment that apply in policing to influence the objectives set. Informal leaders tend to have the persona to nurture different team members into attaining these elements as mentioned and as a result, impact on how the formal objectives of the team are met.

Wuestewald (2006) explains that with informal leaders, the team members are in positions to adopt personal qualities that are emphasized. The same is true for formal leaders only that members easily relate to informal command more due to lack of pressure.

Informal leaders also have the capacity to influence on the decision that formal leaders are looking to take. In most police units, there is the element of participative leadership where informal leaders help in addressing problems and collectively, the team finds solutions (Kaptein & Reenen, 2001). Given this circumstances', the informal leader has what can be termed as the informal knowledge that can influence the final formal decision to be made. Due to the constant

interaction with fellow team members, informal leaders can be more aware of a situation than their formal counterparts (Bolden, 2011). For this reason, they impact the manner in which decisions and strategic measures can be taken.

A major difference in how informal and formal leaders' impact on policy agency is that of organizational commitment. Campbell & Kodz (2011) explain that formal police leaders have the obligation of outlining the procedures, objectives and tasks assignments to team members for the success of the entire organization to be realized. These needs to be done in a formal way because they need to be recognized by authority. When it comes to such roles, informal leaders tend to have little to no power over such matters. This is because the consequences arising from any failure in relation to this, needs to be addressed in a formal way.

Why Do Informal Leaders Exist in the Police Force?

Having established the different ways in which formal and informal leaders compare, it is important to understand why the latter exist in an agency with a command staff. Whisenand & McCain (2015) offer the explanation of the importance of informal supervision as one of the reasons as to why informal leaders exist. Given the demands of being a police, one often requires the leadership of both formal and informal leaders. The latter tends to play a key role in field related assignments where the presence of the former can be lacking. The informal supervision is achieved while taking into consideration that what has already been implemented by formal leaders, is actually being achieved. In a good way, informal leaders exist within an agency to ensure accountability and responsibility.

In addition to the above, there is also the explanation of future leadership roles looking to be exploited. In as much as informal leaders personally position themselves in such states, they allow for those in authority to identify future leaders within a given team (Bolden, 2011). The

same can be said about the police force. It has been witnessed that individuals who offer great informal leaderships are often recognized and easily considered for formal roles. This is more of an ethical stand for those in leadership to recognize the efforts made by informal leaders. As mentioned above, informal leaders do not just assume their status; it is often through their peers that they are given such recognition. Therefore, because organizations are constantly evolving and the need for promotion is adamant, informal leaders exist to make it easier for such measures to be undertaken.

Another reason as to why informal leadership exists even in the presence of a command staff in a policing unit is because they ensure inspired teamwork is achieved. Whisenand & McCain (2015) are of the opinion that informal roles give great satisfaction as far as job involvement, problem identification and solution are concerned. This means that once the formal procedures have been implemented, the informal leaders, through diverse elements will nurture an environment whereby every team member plays a role in attaining those procedures. This shows their importance in creating job satisfaction and encouraging teamwork at all times.

How Failed Formal Leadership Can Impact a Department

Given the understanding of the reasons and impact informal leaders have on a team, this does not in any way shield it from failed formal leadership. It is important to note that in as much as informal leaders assume some of the roles to be played by formal leaders when the latter does not perform, the entire team will fail in its obligations. A police department will not realize its goals when formal leaders do not lead as required of them. With formal leadership comes the authority and most importantly responsibilities (Campbell & Kodz, 2011). Therefore, even with all the power to make specific commands, the deficiency of leading means failed responsibilities not only for the leader, but for the department as well.

Other than failed goals, the departmental growth can also be affected. Success for a team is achieved in two ways; a general level and a personal one. Kouzes & Posner (2012) explains that in order for a team to realize growth and development, it has to be succeeding in its obligations. When formal leaders do not lead responsibly, they are denying their team the opportunity to realize potential growth. This is because it is the responsibility of the leader to carve out a process that will ensure that the potential of the team does not remain constant. From this, individual growth can be realized and as a result, so will organizational ones.

In addition to the above, a failed leader tends to lower the motivation of the team members. Without proper guidance, police teams will be in the dark over what is required of them. As such, lack not only the direction, but the motivation to carry out their duties (Whisenand & McCain, 2015). This goes to show how dependent team members are on leaders because where the latter is lacking, the former is affected.

When higher formal leaders fail to lead, there is the potential of weakening the leadership of the entire department. Keeping in mind that there is a leadership hierarchy to be maintained at all times, a number of responsibilities often increase as the level increases. From this, when those in higher levels fail in their positions to lead, the effect trickles down to the rest of the leaders such that a culture of incompetence is nurtured. Kouzes & Posner (2012) express that failure in leadership is easily perceived as a weakness or incapability by others. The result of this can lead to the promotion of the same within other leadership positions and thus, the entire organization.

Consequences of Informal Leaders Overstepping Their Boundaries

It is not a coincidence that failed or well performing formal leadership can be met with informal leaders overstepping their boundaries. Naturally, in any organizational departments inclusive of the police force, conflicts are inevitable to happen. This is because of personality

differences because no two people are the same. Therefore, it is a given that conflicts will arise between formal and informal leaders when the latter overstep their boundary.

In the workplace, it is always an advantage to have boundaries to show the limits to which different members have authority or access to certain elements (Wuestewald, 2006). Sometimes, consciously or not, informal leaders can take on formal roles and lead to them overstepping their position and power. In such a situation, conflict will arise as those in formal positions demand for overall respect. Police leaders have to show strength and demand respect from their team members so that their authority and position can be recognized (Whisenand & McCain, 2015). When an informal leader threatens to take this away from the formal one, conflict can arise towards establishing who is in charge. Therefore, as the formal leader strives to ensure his or her authority is well understood, the informal one can hinder this by taking up some formal roles.

As a reflection of the above, conflict tend to arise when informal leaders work out of their limitation because of mixed team visions. Every leader has a vision that they want their team to realize (Wuestewald, 2006) and, where two leaderships collide, the vision for the team remains unclear. Informal leaders ought to work within the vision range already established by the formal authority. By overstepping their position, it can only mean that they are introducing new concepts and agendas for the team to realize. This in itself can cause conflicts within the team as members collide to establish which goals should be met while utilizing the resources available.

This can also bring about the issue of followership. As formal leaders have formal teams to follow them, but within these teams are informal teams that remain faithful to the informal authority. When the latter is working out of their limitations, their followers are prone to be supportive of them because as explained by Bolden (2011), strong leadership can be exemplified

by the kind of following one established. In such a situation, the followership of the formal leader will be threatened and this can easily lead to the fall out of a departmental team when everyone starts to take sides.

View of Formal Leadership Towards Informal Ones

Lastly, to understand formal and informal leadership in a department, there needs to be the understanding of how the former views the latter. Formal team leaders consider their informal counterparts to be well positioned to constantly establish and maintain professional relations with their peers. This is because of the amount of time and deficiency of authoritative responsibility to influence such relationships. Formal police leaders have to exercise a level of authority over their team members (Whisenand & McCain, 2015) and this can affect the relationship they have.

Informal leaders, however, lack such authoritative influence that can strain relationships. In addition to this, they also have more time to interact with their peers, thus understanding them better. Informal leaders are constantly available to their peers and it is because of this that an open communication is established (Bolden, 2011). This further builds on the kind of relationship and influence they can have over the others. Consequently, due to their informal nature, they do not take into account to punish any wrongdoings. In the policing department, a negative experience with a formal leader can limit the kind of professional relationship one has with them. However, with the informal leaders, the constant interaction, lack in judgment and punishment greatly helps build relationships as it nurtures the desired character within an individual.

Conclusion

It can be established that both formal and informal leaders have important roles to play within a team. Given the authoritative power that comes with formal leadership, the roles they play drive at setting and achieving specific goals. This means that they are of greater importance because they help establish why a given organization or team exists. To help them achieve their objectives are the informal leaders who help build on cultural perspectives and behavior. This is true within the police departments because of the ethical standards that informal leaders help to nurture in different people. Given that the two differ in terms of authority, it is understandable how their impact within an agency differs as well. This is because they play their roles significantly to the authority that they have. The success of a team will indirectly dwell on the existence of informal leaders and the efforts put forth by the formal one to lead effectively. Furthermore, as the formal leader recognizes the ability of the informal one to maintain professional relationships with team members, the latter has to constantly respect the position of the former. This goes to show that there is the need for informal leadership to understand their boundaries and work within them. However, when they overstep them, conflict can arise and the consequences of this can be fatal to the development and continual existence of a team or department.

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